

God's Word Changes Everything

Psalm 60

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

To the choirmaster: according to Shushan Eduth. A Miktam of David; for instruction; when he strove with Aram-naharaim and with Aram-zobah, and when Joab on his return struck down twelve thousand of Edom in the Valley of Salt.

- O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses;
you have been angry; oh, restore us.*
- ² *You have made the land to quake; you have torn it open;
repair its breaches, for it totters.*
- ³ *You have made your people see hard things;
you have given us wine to drink that made us stagger.*
- ⁴ *You have set up a banner for those who fear you,
that they may flee to it from the bow. Selah*
- ⁵ *That your beloved ones may be delivered,
give salvation by your right hand and answer us!*
- ⁶ *God has spoken in his holiness:
"With exultation I will divide up Shechem
and portion out the Vale of Succoth.*
- ⁷ *Gilead is mine; Manasseh is mine;
Ephraim is my helmet;
Judah is my scepter.*
- ⁸ *Moab is my washbasin;
upon Edom I cast my shoe;
over Philistia I shout in triumph."*
- ⁹ *Who will bring me to the fortified city?
Who will lead me to Edom?*
- ¹⁰ *Have you not rejected us, O God?
You do not go forth, O God, with our armies.*
- ¹¹ *Oh, grant us help against the foe,
for vain is the salvation of man!*
- ¹² *With God we shall do valiantly;
it is he who will tread down our foes.*

Riding the Roller Coaster

When I was in high school and college, I rode the Christian experience roller coaster. I would attend a concert or a youth rally or a weekend conference and I would come out feeling like I was on top of the world. I had no doubt of God's love or of my sincere passion for Jesus. I felt like a super-Christian . . . for a couple of days . . . until I blew it. I would sin in some big way – losing my temper, lying, lusting, etc. – and I would then feel like the biggest failure in all of Christendom. Suddenly, I was a fraud, someone so weak and full of failure that God couldn't possibly love me.

When I first became a Calvinist, I was initially overwhelmed by the saving power of God's sovereign grace. I found deep assurance in knowing that I was loved by God before the foundation of the world, chosen and called

by the sovereign grace of God. But my sin continued to haunt and plague me, and I found a song in the year 2000 that echoed the deep turmoil in my heart. It's called "Prove Me Wrong" by Caedmon's Call and it opens with these lines –

*Sometimes I fear, maybe I'm not chosen
You've hardened my heart like Pharaoh,
And that would explain why life is so hard for me*

This is the part of the sermon where a good pastor would tell you, "Well, that was when I was in my teens and twenties, but now that I'm 43 years old and your pastor, I don't ride the emotional roller coaster anymore." Well, you don't have a good pastor, you have me. The truth is, I still struggle with anxiety and I still battle a storm of emotions on a regular basis. Many of us struggle with bouncing back and forth between pride and despair, between a presumptive over-confidence and shameful sense of rejection and hopelessness. While my swings may not be as extreme as they were when I was 18 or 20, one of the reasons why I have come to love the psalms so much is that I see my own tumultuous heart reflected in David's.

There's great irony and seeming contradiction in the title and opening lines of Psalm 60. The title tells us that this psalm was written after some of Israel's greatest military victories. We can read a summary of these victories in 2 Samuel 8. We don't get any great details of these battles, but it seems clear that these were tremendous victories for Israel under King David and General Joab. So the title announces that this psalm was written after great military victories, yet it opens with lines of rejection and despair -

A. God's Rejection of His People (vv. 1-3)

*O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses;
you have been angry; oh, restore us.
² You have made the land to quake; you have torn it open;
repair its breaches, for it totters.
³ You have made your people see hard things;
you have given us wine to drink that made us stagger.*

Apparently, the victories Israel won did not come quickly or easily, and defeat and frustration came before the victories. Scholars have different theories to explain this apparently inconsistency, but here's what we know for sure: Israel suffered through at least two years of division and civil war after Saul's death before God unified Israel under the Davidic monarchy. Even before Saul and Jonathan died on the battlefield against the Philistines, Israel had suffered oppression and raids at the hands of the Philistines and others, often while Saul was zealously pursuing David, instead of defending Israel.

What appears to have happened after David became king over the whole nation of Israel and he moved his capital city from Hebron to Jerusalem was a period of consolidating Israel's strength against her surrounding enemies. Before David conquered Jerusalem, he defeated the Philistines in a decisive victory at Baal-Perizim. Then, after he settled in Jerusalem, he led his armies out against the Moabites and then against the Syrians and Arameans in the north.

Apparently, while David and his army were fighting these nations in the north, the Edomites attacked Israel from the south. Initially, it seems the Edomites were having success against Israel. David takes these initial defeats at the hands of the Edomites as evidence that God had, in anger, rejected Israel and broken down their defenses against the enemy. David uses strong language of judgment here, as God has apparently rejected His people in anger and forced them into hardship as a judgment against them.

The two images of judgment that dominate these opening verses are those of a great earthquake that tears open the land and forced drunkenness. God often uses the images of shaking the earth and of a cup of foaming strong wine as images of judgment. Both images powerfully convey the idea that judgment is disorienting – what seems stable and strong is thrown down and shown to be unreliable, and what seemed clear is now cloudy and confused. In a military situation, defenses that seemed strong are overcome by the enemy, and an enemy who seemed weak and subdued is not fierce and overpowering.

In our lives, we can experience these realities for a variety of reasons:

- Someone we trusted disappoints us.
- We have become suddenly weak and vulnerable in areas of our lives where we thought we had grown strong.
- A church leader or respected spiritual mentor falls into grave sin or else embraces some troubling new doctrine that contradicts everything they used to teach.
- Our marriage, which had once been so healthy and a source of strength, has entered into a period of extended conflict and bitterness.
- A job we loved and once found fulfilling has become dreary or more difficult than we ever imagined.

If you've ever experienced one of these major life-altering realities, you can understand the imagery of the shaking of the earth or the staggering of drunkenness. You can also understand why such catastrophic defeats can leave you wondering if God has abandoned you, if He still loves you, if His hand of blessing and protection is still on your life, or if you've been utterly rejected and cast down by God.

B. God's Refuge for His People (v. 4)

As we are reeling and staggering from heavy blows in our lives, God speaks a word of hope and offers a place of refuge:

*You have set up a banner for those who fear you,
that they may flee to it from the bow. Selah*

This is the first sign of hope in this psalm, and it is an offer of sanctuary, of a rallying place, a place to gather and hide from the attacks of the enemy. The picture here is of God's people in a panicked retreat, under heavy fire as their defenses have failed and the enemy is in pursuit. As people who are scattered and fleeing, the first thing they need is a safe rallying place, a place to gather together and be protected while a counter-attack is planned. That's what this verse identifies: God has given His people a place to rally and be protected.

In Exodus 17, after God gave Israel a great victory over the Amalekites, Moses set up an altar of remembrance and he calls the altar, "The LORD is my Banner." One of the functions of a banner in the ancient world was to

identify ownership. God raises a banner over His people, not just to give them a rallying point to gather together as one people, but to identify them as His people, something which God makes even clearer later in the psalm.

When we are feeling defeated and in retreat from the attack of the enemy of our souls, we need a rallying place, a place where we can gather with God's people and remember that we are His. We need a place of refuge and regrouping. Corporate worship on the Lord's Day provides us with this banner, this rallying place, where God gathers us and claims us as His before He sends us back out into the battle.

C. God's Response to His People (vv. 5-8)

When God gathers His people under His banner, His people cry to Him:

*That your beloved ones may be delivered,
give salvation by your right hand and answer us!*

The prayer request here is direct, urgent and clear. God's people need God to save, and that salvation comes by the right hand of God. The right hand of God is an expression used again and again in the Old Testament, and we know that it ultimately points us to Jesus Christ, who is seated at the right hand of the Father, at the right hand of the majesty on high, as Hebrews 1:3-4 tells us about Jesus –

*He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.
(ESV)*

So a cry for salvation from the right hand of God is a cry for salvation from Jesus. Jesus won this salvation when He made purification for our sins in His offering of Himself in our place on the cross. The accomplishment of that purification is what entitled Jesus to the right to sit at the right hand of the Majesty as the one mediator between God and man, our perfect and eternal Great High Priest, our salvation, the one whose person and name is far superior to the angels.

God hears the cry of His people for salvation. He then speaks to them, and the word that God speak makes all the difference:

⁶ *God has spoken in his holiness:
"With exultation I will divide up Shechem
and portion out the Vale of Succoth.
⁷ Gilead is mine; Manasseh is mine;
Ephraim is my helmet;
Judah is my scepter.
⁸ Moab is my washbasin;
upon Edom I cast my shoe;
over Philistia I shout in triumph."*

These lines in verses 6-8 are apparently a prophetic oracle that God spoke to David in response to David's prayer on behalf of the people. David was probably fighting intensely against the Syrians in the north when he

received word of the invasion by the Edomites in the south. His desperation at being tied up with a strong enemy in the north while his people are being ravaged by fierce invaders in the south is reflected in the opening lines of verses 1-3 and in the earnest prayer of verse 5. This is God's response to that prayer.

David quotes this same prophetic oracle word-for-word in Psalm 108:7-9. In fact, the entire last half of Psalm 60 is the same as the last half of Psalm 108, which was probably written at the same time. So we know this word from God was a clear, compelling word for David, inspiring two psalms. But because of our geographic and cultural difference, living on the other side of the world 3,000 years later, it's a bit difficult for us to understand.

Shechem and Succoth are the areas on the west and east of the Jordan River. Israel was on both sides of the Jordan River, between the Sea of Galilee in the North and the Dead Sea in the South. Succoth, which was on the east side of the Jordan, was surrounded by enemy nations and always in danger of being cut off from the main part of Israel, which was between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. God is saying that He is Lord over both areas of land, and He will give them to whomever He wishes.

In verse 7, God is claiming His people as His own. He says, "Gilead is mine, Manasseh is mine; Ephraim is my helmet; Judah is my scepter." This is God's way of saying, "All of my people belong to me, in all of their tribes and territories." Ephraim and Judah had been at war with each other during the civil war following the death of Saul, but now Ephraim is God's helmet, a mighty force to conquer, but Judah is God's scepter, His chosen instrument to rule His people.

There is nothing better for a believer to hear in times of doubt and distress than to hear God say, "You are mine."

Then God turns His attention from His people to the enemies of His people, especially those who may be threatening from the south while the army is fighting in the north. Moab and Edom lie to the south east of Judah and Philistia had been the most constant source of harassment from the southwest. When God says, "*Moab is my washbasin; upon Edom I cast my shoe; over Philistia I shout in triumph,*" He is placing these enemies of God's people in the positions of household slaves, who will wash His feet, or conquered enemies, over whom he will shout in triumph.

Once we have heard God tell us, "You are mine," we then need to hear Him say, "I am stronger than all of your enemies and I will triumph over them finally and decisively, and you will share in that victory." The victory over Satan and sin and death and hell was secured at the cross, where Jesus paid for our sins, and in the resurrection, where Jesus overthrew death and established His supremacy forever!

And yet there is still a battle to be fought. This oracle from God did change the outlook of the army from despair to hope, from feeling rejected to finding refuge and strength, from fleeing in terror to marching confidently to victory. But still they needed to march on the enemy, to march into battle.

D. God's Rescue of His People (vv. 9-12)

As David and Joab lead the armies of Israel south to face the Edomites, they have heard that they belong to the Lord and that the Lord is sovereign over their enemies, but still they need to know if God is indeed going to be with them and is going to lead them to victory, and so the psalm continues –

⁹ Who will bring me to the fortified city?

Who will lead me to Edom?

¹⁰ Have you not rejected us, O God?

You do not go forth, O God, with our armies.

¹¹ Oh, grant us help against the foe,

for vain is the salvation of man!

¹² With God we shall do valiantly;

it is he who will tread down our foes.

If God had been with the armies defending southern Judah, the Edomites would never have been able to invade and break down their defenses. More troops bringing reinforcements from the north, fresh from victories over the Syrians, will not bring salvation to the people of God. “Vain in the salvation of man” is a true reminder that both the reinforcements David and Joab are bringing as well as any help Israel might seek from Egypt or other nations is all empty and useless. God must grant salvation, God must be with His people.

These verses serve as a sober reminder against presumption. Just because we have heard God say, “You are mine” and we know that He is mightier than our enemies doesn’t mean that we can blindly march off into battle, confident of victory, no matter what. We need the presence, power, protection and plan of the Lord for victory.

Jesus knew this truth very well. He knew he was the Son of God. He heard the voice of His Father at His baptism say to Him, “You are my beloved Son. With You I am well pleased.” He knew that God was mightier than anything He would face. But still Jesus regularly spent all night in prayer. Still Jesus relied on the wisdom of Scripture and quoted Deuteronomy to the devil in the wilderness temptations. Still Jesus agonized and submitted Himself to His Father’s will. He never ever presumed that because He was the Son of God and God was mightier than all, He would be fine and didn’t need to pray or seek His Father’s presence and protection and plan for His life.

So many pastors have fallen into shameful, disgraceful sin because they presumed they would be okay. So many marriages have grown cold and broken because both husband and wife assumed they were doing fine. So many lives have become empty of God’s presence and power because of the paralyzing poison of presumption.

David will presume nothing, but he will continue to plea for the Lord for what he knows Israel needs:

Oh, grant us help against the foe,

for vain is the salvation of man!

¹² With God we shall do valiantly;

it is he who will tread down our foes.

Without God, all the best plans and resources of the world of men are useless, empty and vain. With God, and with God alone, we shall do valiantly, for it is He who will tread down our enemies – all of our enemies!

Hear the Word of the Lord!

So, what do we need in the battles of life? As we ride the emotional roller coaster of highs and lows, victories and defeats? We need to hear the word of the Lord and let His truth anchor our souls in what is real: If we believe in Him, we are His and He is more powerful than all our enemies. And yet we need Him. The Christian

life cannot be lived in either paralyzing fear or in poisonous presumption, but we must stand on the promises of God and walk in the power of the presence of God.

We gather each week under the Lord's banner to be reminded of who our King is and of what His powerful promises mean to our lives. We gather around this table this morning so our King can meet us, feed us and abide in us by faith. We go out to face the enemy, and we dare not presume to do so in our own strength because we are the children of God. We need Him! It is with our God's powerful presence alone that we shall do valiantly, for it is He and He alone who will tread down our enemies!